

Abraham Joshua Heschel's Jeremiah: A Prophet of Anger and Love

(The Prophets, ch. 6)

THE AGE OF WRATH

Utterances denoting the wrath of God, the intent and threat of destruction, are found more frequently and expressed more strongly in Jeremiah than in any other prophet. For this reason, Jeremiah has often been called a prophet of wrath. However, it would be more significant to say that Jeremiah lived in an age of wrath. His contemporaries had no understanding of the portent of their times, of the way in which God was present at the time. They did not care for time. But a prophet has a responsibility for the moment, an openness to what the moment reveals. He is a person who knows what time it is. To Jeremiah his time was an emergency, one instant away from a cataclysmic event... "For the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath" (7: 29). Jeremiah hurled a dreadful word at his people, accusing them of provoking or exciting God's anger, an expression not used by earlier prophets: "The sons of Israel and the sons of Judah... have done nothing but provoke Me to anger by the work of their hands, says the Lord. This city has aroused My anger and wrath..." (32: 30-35). The words he proclaimed are merciless...

GOD'S LOVE OF ISRAEL

God's love of Israel is one of Israel's sacred certainties which Jeremiah, like Hosea and Isaiah before him, tried to instill in the minds of the people. Thus says the Lord: "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; ... With everlasting love have I loved you, therefore I have continued My faithfulness to you (31: 2-3). It was in love that God and Israel met: "The word of God came to me, saying: Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, thus says the Lord: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed Me in the wilderness, In a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of His harvest. All who would destroy him would be held guilty; punishment would come to them, says the Lord" (2: 1-3)... Following the prophet Hosea, Jeremiah employed the analogy of married love to express the relationship of God and Israel. "I was their husband, says the Lord" (31: 32).

THE INNER TENSION

Jeremiah depicted the dramatic tension in the inner life of God. As in Abraham's debate with God over the threatened destruction of Sodom, there was an implied desire not to let the judgment fall upon Judah. "Go to and fro in the streets of Jerusalem, see, I entreat you, and know! And look in its broad open places to see whether you can find one who does justly, who practices faithfulness, says the Lord" (5: 1). On account of their sins, the land would be subjected to devastation. Yet the judgment seemed to be painful to the Supreme Judge, and Jeremiah tried to convey that God sought to justify His judgment. The words of God betray an inner oscillation:

How can I pardon you?

Your children have forsaken Me,
 Have sworn by those who are no gods.
 When I fed them to the full,
 They committed adultery...
Shall I not punish them for these things? Says the Lord.
Shall I not avenge Myself on a nation such as this? ...
 They judge not with justice
 The cause of the fatherless,...
 They do not defend the rights of the needy.
Shall I not punish them for these things? Says the Lord.
Shall I not avenge Myself on a nation such as this? ...
 Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks deceitfully.
 With his mouth each speaks peaceably to his neighbor,
 But in his heart he plans an ambush for him.
Shall I not punish them for these things? Says the Lord.
Shall I not avenge Myself on a nation such as this?
 Jeremiah 5: 7-9,28-29; 9: 8-9 [H. 9: 7-8]

THE SORROW AND ANGUISH OF THE LORD

A great hope was Israel; "the first fruits" were a foretaste of a harvest of blessing. But as time passed, God's hope was dashed... God's pain and disappointment ring throughout the book of Jeremiah. What a sublime paradox for the Creator of heaven and earth to implore the people so humbly: "Thus says the Lord: what wrong did your fathers find in Me, that they went far away from Me, and pursued what is worthless, and became worthless? (2: 5). The heart of melancholy beats in God's words: "My people have forgotten Me" (18: 15); "they have forsaken Me" (2: 13)... How much quiet tenderness, how much unsaid devotion is contained in the way in which the Lord of heaven and earth spoke of Israel: "My people," "My dear people" (bath 'ami)... As great as God's wrath is His anguish...

The prophet was told by God: "You shall say to them this word: let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease, for My dearly beloved people... (14: 17)... A sense of delicacy prevented the prophet from spelling out the meaning of the word: Mourn My people for Me as well.... "Thus says the Lord: ... O My dear people (bath 'ami), gird on sackcloth, and roll in ashes; make mourning as for an only son, most bitter lamentation, for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us" (6: 22,26). These words are aglow with a divine pathos that can be reflected, but not pronounced: God is mourning Himself... Israel's distress was more than a hitman tragedy. With Israel's distress came the affliction of God, His displacement, His homelessness in the land, in the world. And the prophet's prayer, "O save us," involved not only the fate of a people. It involved the fate of God in relation to the people. For Israel's desertion was not merely an injury to man; it was an insult to God... "O Thou hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble! Why shouldst Thou be like a stranger in the land, like a wayfarer who turns aside to tarry for a night? Why shouldst Thou be like a man astounded? Like a mighty man who cannot save? (14: 8)...

Thus says the Lord of hosts:
Consider, and call for the mourning women to come;
Let them make haste and raise a wailing over us,
That our eyes may run down with tears,
And our eyelids gush with water.

Jeremiah 9: 17-28 [H. 9: 16-17]

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: ... raise a wailing **over us**..." Does not the word of God mean: Cry for Israel and Me? The voice of God calling upon the people to weep, lament, and mourn, for the calamities are about to descend upon them, is itself a voice of grief, a voice of weeping.

O Lord, Thou hast deceived me, פתיתני ה',
And I was deceived; נאפת;
Thou art stronger than I, חזקתני,
And Thou hast prevailed. ותוכל.

Jeremiah 20: 7

This standard rendition misses completely the meaning of the text and ascribes to Jeremiah a pitiful platitude ("Thou art stronger than I"). The proper rendition of Jeremiah's exclamation would be:

O Lord, Thou hast seduced me,
And I am seduced;
Thou hast raped me
And I am overcome.

The meaning of this extraordinary confession becomes clear when we consider what commentators have failed to notice, namely, the specific meaning of the individual words. The striking feature of the verse is the use of two verbs *patah* and *hazak*. The first term is used in the Bible and in the special sense of wrongfully inducing a woman to consent to prenuptial intercourse (Exod. 22: 16 [H. 22: 15]; cf Hos. 2: 14 [H. 2: 16]; Job 31: 9). The second term denotes the violent forcing of a woman to submit to extra nuptial intercourse, which is thus performed against her will (Deut. 22: 15; cf. Judg. 19: 25; II Sam. 13: 11).¹ The first denotes seduction or enticement; the second, rape. Seduction is distinguished from rape in that it does not involve violence. The woman seduced has consented, although her consent may have been gained by allurements. The words used by Jeremiah to describe the impact of God upon his life are identical with the terms for seduction and rape in the legal terminology of the Bible.

¹ "וַיִּחְזַק הָאִישׁ בְּפִלְגֶּשׁוֹ וַיֵּצֵא אֶלְיָהֶם חֲחוּץ וַיִּדְעוּ אוֹתָהּ" (שופטים יט, כה); "וַיִּתְּנָשׂ אֵלָיו לְאָכַל וַיִּחְזַק בָּהּ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ בּוֹאִי שְׁכְבִי עִמִּי" (שמואל-ב יג, יא).

These terms used in immediate juxtaposition forcefully convey the complexity of the divine-human relationship: sweetness of enticement as well as violence of rape. Jeremiah, who like Hosea thought of the relationship between God and Israel in the image of love, interpreted his own involvement in the same image. This interpretation betrays an ambivalence in the prophet's understanding of his own experience. The call to be a prophet is more than an invitation. It is first of all a feeling of being enticed, of acquiescence or willing surrender. But this winsome feeling is only one aspect of the experience. The other aspect is a sense of being ravished or carried away by violence, of yielding to overpowering force against one's own will. The prophet feels both the attraction and the coercion of God, the appeal and the pressure, the charm and the stress. He is conscious of both voluntary identification and forced capitulation.

This dialectic of what takes place in the prophetic consciousness points to the approach we have adopted in our analysis. Objectively considered, it is, on the one hand, the divine pathos which stirs and entices the prophet, and, on the other hand, unconditioned power which exercises sheer compulsion over the prophet. Subjectively, it is in consequence the willing response of sympathy to persuasion and also the sense of being utterly delivered up to the overwhelming power of God. A man whose message is doom for the people he loves not only forfeits his own capacity for joy, but also provokes the hostility and outrage of his contemporaries. The sights of woe, the anticipation of disaster, nearly crush his soul...

Polarity of emotion is a striking fact in the life of Jeremiah. We encounter him in the pit of utter agony and at the height of extreme joy, carried away by divine wrath and aching with supreme compassion. There are words of railing accusation and denunciation; the lips that pleaded for mercy utter petitions for retribution, for the destruction of those who stand in the way of the people's accepting his prophetic word. Indeed, the commission he received at the time of his call endowed him with the power to carry out two opposite roles:

To pluck up and to break down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant.

Jeremiah 1: 10

Aside from the moral problem involved in the harsh petitions, there is the personal problem. Do not such contrasts or opposing attitudes indicate a lack of integrity? Is not his pleading for the destruction of his opponents a collapse of his power of mercy? A way of comprehending these contradictions as being parts of a unified personality is to remember that the prophet's inner life was not wholly his own. His emotional situation reflected the divine relation to Israel: compassion as well as anger. What he felt was not always original with him. "Filled with the wrath of God," it was beyond his ability to weigh, measure or control the outburst of anger. The actual occasion of such an outburst may at times have been a personal one; its possibility and intensity derived from sympathy. The tension of being caught, heart and soul, in two opposing currents of violent emotion, was more than a human being could bear.